

An abstract painting of a face, rendered with thick, expressive brushstrokes. The face is composed of various colors, including shades of blue, green, yellow, and red, creating a vibrant and textured appearance. The eyes are prominent, with blue and green hues. The overall style is highly textured and expressive, characteristic of contemporary African art.

OMENKA

REFRACTED REALITIES:

Contemporary African Art through
Form, Image, and Symbol



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A group art exhibition by:

Adeola Abisoye Odewole
Olu Frank Idozie
Damilola Victoria Akinpelu
Matthias Ibileke
Bukola Febisola Ogunsakin

January 30 - February 13, 2026
At Omenka Gallery, Lagos

Curated by: Oliver Enwonwu and Ladun Ogidan

Front cover: (detail) Bukola Febisola Ogunsakin, Unfiltered, 2019, Mixed Media, 120 x 140cm
Back cover: (detail) Matthias Ibileke, Peace, 2025, Photography

INTRODUCTION

Refracted Realities: Contemporary African Art Through Form, Image, and Symbol

Contemporary African art is often described as a vibrant tapestry woven from threads of history, tradition, and modern innovation. Artists across Africa and the diaspora draw upon ancestral narratives, spiritual beliefs, and indigenous aesthetics to create works that resonate locally and globally. *Refracted Realities* builds on these rich intersections – highlighting how form, image, and symbol become conduits for cultural memory and imagination. In this exhibition, everyday materials transform into carriers of meaning, and artistic processes become acts of remembrance and re-interpretation. The result is an academically grounded yet deeply personal visual dialogue on heritage, identity, and the evolving African experience.

Materiality and Symbolic Form

Many contemporary African artists imbue materials and forms with symbolic significance, merging the tactile with the conceptual. As curator Okwui Enwezor insisted, African art should not be confined to a narrow, “exotic” framework imposed by the West. Instead, artists often reclaim material as language – using media inherent to their cultural environment or charged with historical resonance. Nigerian-British artist Yinka Shonibare's signature use of Dutch wax textiles is a prime example: a colonial-era fabric reappropriated as a symbol of African identity, it allows Shonibare to interrogate the entangled histories of race, class, and power. Likewise, Ghanaian sculptor El Anatsui famously transforms discarded bottle caps and metals into shimmering tapestries, echoing traditional African practices of repurposing while commenting on contemporary consumerism. In such works, form and material carry layers of meaning – the medium itself becomes a narrative device, invoking communal history and the persistence of memory. As one commentator notes, “*the aesthetics of traditional African art – bold patterns, vibrant colors, symbolic forms – persist in contemporary creations,*” reinterpreted through modern techniques and found materials. This continuity of form underscores how African artists honor heritage even as they innovate, weaving past and present into new visual expressions.

Romuald Hazoumè's installation *La Bouche du Roi* (1997–2005) repurposes over 300 discarded jerrycans to evoke the diagram of a slave ship, as shown above. By turning modern waste into memory-laden artifacts, Hazoumè creates a haunting link between past and present – referencing the transatlantic slave trade while critiquing ongoing economic and environmental imbalances. Such works exemplify how contemporary African artists use found materials as symbolic vessels, bridging *historical*

trauma and contemporary reality through form and process.

Memory, Spirituality, and Identity

Across the continent, artistic practice serves as a form of cultural remembering and spiritual meditation. Memory, in particular, emerges as an active, generative force – not a passive record of the past but a tool for reshaping the present. A new generation of African artists “turns to the past – not out of nostalgia, but as a way to reshape the present,” working with materials marked by violence, migration, and resilience to revive cultural memory while confronting global inequalities. These artists draw from local histories and craft traditions to question the boundaries of identity, territory, and representation. In their work, historical memory, political resistance, and spiritual reflection intersect, yielding what one critic calls “a geography of trauma, but also one of reinvention” where African voices reclaim the right to narrate their own histories. For example, Modou Dieng Yacine layers paint and photography on burlap and denim, incorporating the colors and colonial architecture of his native Senegal to symbolically “recolonize” space with his Africanness; here, memory becomes a tool for reappropriating place and identity from an African perspective. Such practices echo a broader phenomenon: many African artists channel personal and collective memories into visual form as a means of healing and transformation. The 2024 Dak'Art Biennale explicitly embraced this approach – moving beyond simplistic notions of “African identity” to explore *spiritual resilience* and the environment, with artworks that wove together threads of personal and collective memory into universal human experiences while remaining deeply rooted in specific African contexts. In a similar vein, Ethiopian photographer Aïda Muluneh integrates traditional body painting and symbolic motifs into striking contemporary portraits, bridging ancient ritual and present-day commentary on identity and faith. These examples illustrate how spiritual heritage and cultural memory inform contemporary African visual practices, imbuing them with a profound sense of time, ancestry, and metaphysical inquiry.

Crucially, African artists often engage with cultural symbols and cosmologies as living elements rather than static lore. In Yoruba-influenced works, for instance, color and pattern might invoke Orisha deities or proverbs, asserting the continued relevance of indigenous knowledge. Art becomes a space where the sacred and the secular intersect. As observed in a recent museum exhibition, “fabric emerges as a generative medium through which questions of identity, memory, and ancestral lineage *are thoughtfully explored*” – a statement that applies not only to textiles but to the very fabric of African art itself.

Materials like cloth, clay, beads, or even digital pixels become extensions of cultural memory. They carry traces of lineage and belief, allowing artists to position heritage as both subject and medium. In doing so, contemporary works can function almost as cultural archives or altars: preserving memory, invoking spirits, and reimagining identity in the present. It is this blend of the historical and the spiritual – the tangible and the intangible – that gives much of African contemporary art its distinctive conceptual depth and emotional resonance.

Reframing African Art in Global Discourse

The themes explored in *Refracted Realities* are part of a wider intellectual framework established by leading curators and thinkers of African art. Figures like Okwui Enwezor and Simon Njami have long argued for new paradigms that reposition African and diasporic art at the center of global conversations, rather than at the periphery of Western art history. Enwezor, for example, devoted his career to underscoring the agency of African artists “historically relegated to the position of object” in colonial narratives, seeking to change who and what is seen at the center of contemporary art discourse. He championed a diasporic imagination – a view of African art as inherently transnational, forged through migration, urban experience, and exchange – thereby challenging any notion of an isolated or monolithic African aesthetic. Major exhibitions and biennales have embodied this shift. The Dakar Biennale (Dak'Art), since 1992, has provided a Pan-African platform where artists present work on their own terms, free from the “exotic” gaze, actively dismantling Western-centric frameworks. Likewise, African national pavilions at the Venice Biennale in recent years have foregrounded themes of indigenous philosophy, memory, and futurism, signaling that African contemporary art engages issues as diverse and nuanced as anywhere else in the world. Through these curatorial lenses, we see African artists not as distant others, but as protagonists of the contemporary – artists who speak in a global idiom yet infuse it with distinct local inflections.

Indeed, as art historian Chika Okeke-Agulu notes, the creative incorporation of historical symbols and materials in African art today is a critical intervention in identity politics. By weaving colonial-era fabrics, images, and narratives into modern artworks, African artists assert an “*Afro-modern cultural identity*” that defies outdated stereotypes of an unchanging traditional Africa. They show that tradition itself can be dynamic and self-reflexive. Heritage is not a fixed relic but a palette of forms and symbols to be reframed – a point vividly demonstrated by artists who juxtapose past and present. The postcolonial

fabric, to borrow scholar Yayra Sumah's term, becomes “a grammar that informs the reading of post-modern African artworks” and a means to “deconstruct and reimagine what it means to be 'African' in the 21st century”. Whether through reassembling masks from petroleum canisters, embedding adinkra symbols in digital art, or blending oral storytelling with video installation, contemporary African creators engage in a dialogue between memory and becoming. They ask viewers to consider not only Africa's histories, but how those histories are refracted through personal experience and artistic vision into new realities.

In summary, *Refracted Realities: Contemporary African Art Through Form, Image, and Symbol* offers a curatorial and scholarly meditation on the power of artistic symbolism in conveying Africa's multifaceted stories. The works on display demonstrate how form can be philosophy, how a material can carry memory, and how an image can invoke unseen spiritual and cultural dimensions. Grounded in key academic insights and curatorial perspectives, the exhibition underlines that African artists are active agents of cultural memory and innovation. They engage with heritage not as something distant or ossified, but as a living wellspring – abstracting and reassembling it to speak to present concerns. In doing so, they produce art that is both deeply rooted and strikingly contemporary: art that refracts reality through the prism of form and symbol, yielding new visions of Africa's past, present, and future

Notes

1. “Contemporary African Art: Refracted Realities and Decolonial Futures,” AFRIKANIZM, 2022. <https://afrikanizm.com/contemporary-african-art-refracted-realities-and-decolonial-futures/>
2. “Dak'Art Biennale,” Artfacts. <https://artfacts.net/institution/dak-art-biennale/6483>
3. Ibid.
4. AFRIKANIZM, op. cit.
5. Ibid.
6. Ibid.

7. Ibid.
8. Tade Ipadeola, "Refracted Realities: Symbolism and Sacred Geometry in Contemporary African Art," *Art+Australia*, 2023.
https://artandaustralia.com/63_1/262_refracted-realities-symbolism-and-sacred-geometry
9. Ibid.
10. Ibid.
11. Ibid.
12. Ibid.
13. "Dak'Art Biennale," Artfacts, op. cit.
14. AFRIKANIZM, op. cit.
15. Okwui Enwezor, "The Postcolonial Constellation: Contemporary Art in a State of Permanent Transition," *Research in African Literatures*, vol. 34, no. 4, 2003, pp. 57–82.
16. Ibid.
17. Ibid.
18. Romuald Hazoumè, "Interview with Simon Njami," *Revue Noire*, 2001.
19. Ibid.
20. Ibid.
21. Ibid.

CATALOGUE

**DAMIOLA
VICTORIA AKINPELU**



Damilola Victoria Akinpelumi is a Nigerian contemporary visual artist whose practice explores identity, culture, and storytelling through mixed media and experimental forms. Her work draws inspiration from everyday narratives, blending bold textures and layered symbolism with contemporary African aesthetics.

She has exhibited in notable Nigerian art spaces, including community showcases at Terra Kulture, Lagos, and National Museum, Onikan, where her works were featured alongside emerging voices in visual arts. Damilola has also participated in art residencies and workshops within Lagos' creative clusters, engaging in projects that use visual expression as a tool for cultural preservation and youth empowerment.

Her practice extends beyond exhibitions into collaborative work with cultural organizations and creative institutions, where she contributes to community development and artistic exchange. Recognized for her innovative approach and growing influence, Damilola is positioned as an important emerging voice within Nigeria's contemporary art scene, with the potential to engage audiences globally.



Held Between Silence
2022



What We Shelter
2023



Where the Morning Begin
2021
120 x 120cm



Market Day
2024
90 x 120cm

**MATTHIAS
IBILEKE**



I am a documentary photographer with about 9 years experience driven by a deep curiosity for human stories and the moments that define them. Specialising in visual storytelling, blending an observational eye with empathy, capturing raw, unfiltered narratives that resonate long after the shutter clicks.

My work extends beyond documentary, spanning portraiture, travel, and lifestyle photography, yet each frame carries the same intention: to reveal truth, emotion, and connection. Whether documenting the quiet dignity of everyday life or the intensity of unfolding events, I approach every subject with sensitivity and respect.

Areas of focus:

- Documentary & Photojournalism
- Portraits with narrative depth
- Travel & cultural storytelling
- Lifestyle & editorial photography



Peace
2025
Photography



Sailors' Nest
2025
Photography



Dexters
2024
Photography



Ajia Sakasaka
2025
Photography



Sulu Gambari
2025
Photography

**BUKOLA
FEBISOLA OGUNSAKIN**



Bukola Febisola Ogunsakin is a multidisciplinary Nigerian visual artist whose work interrogates memory, heritage, and social commentary through painting, installation, and digital expression. Her practice is characterized by a bold use of color, texture, and symbolism that bridges traditional Yoruba influences with contemporary global narratives.

Her works have been presented in cultural showcases at spaces such as the Freedom Park Arts Centre, Lagos, and community exhibitions supported by the Society of Nigerian Artists (SNA), where her distinctive voice stood out among emerging talents. Bukola has also facilitated art workshops and collaborative projects with youth-focused initiatives in Lagos, using creativity as a platform for dialogue and empowerment.

Through her practice, she continues to expand the role of visual art as both cultural preservation and innovation, positioning herself as a dynamic creative force within Nigeria's fast-evolving art landscape, and a rising voice in the global contemporary art scene.



Behind the Mask
2018
Mixed Media
100 x 105cm



Reflection
2017
Oil on canvas
98 x 98cm



Untitled
2016
Oil on canvas
120 x 140cm



Unfiltered
2019
Mixed Media
120 x 140cm

**ADEOLA
ABISOYE ODEWOLE**



Adeola Abisoye Odewole is a UK-based Nigerian multidisciplinary artist and art director whose work spans painting, digital illustration, advertising, and emerging Web3 formats. With a career rooted in both commercial storytelling and fine art, his practice navigates identity, ancestry, and cultural memory—often through visually arresting narratives that connect tradition with contemporary experience.

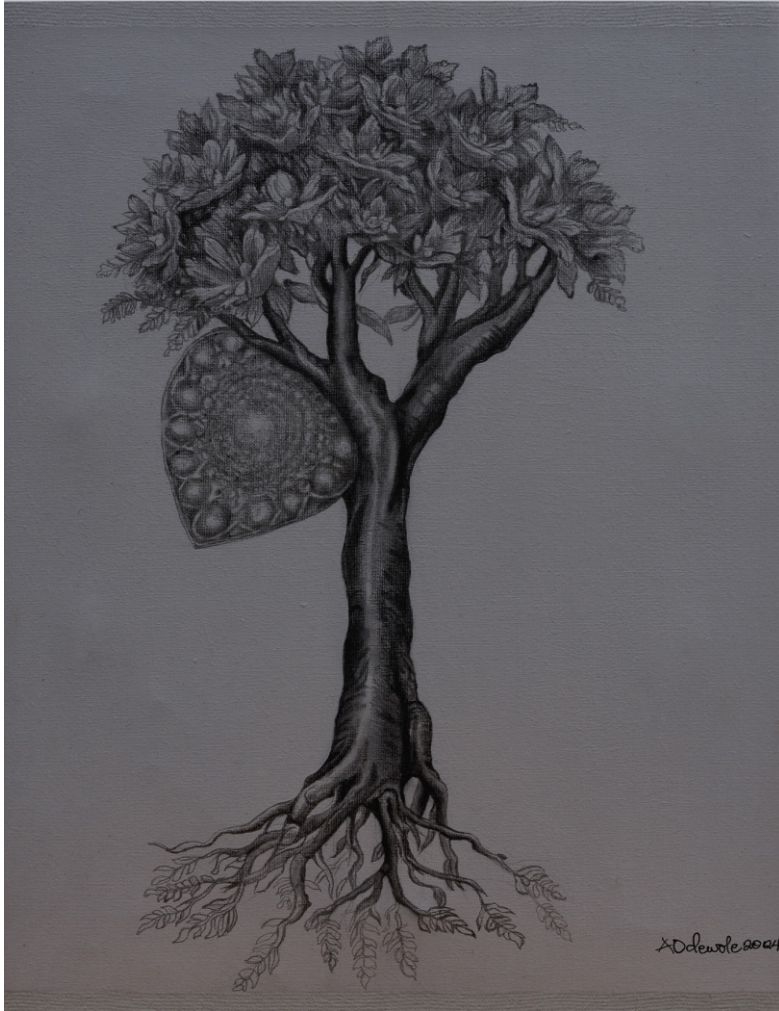
In 2022, he held his debut solo exhibition, *Inward Gaze*, at Windsor Gallery in Lagos. The show introduced audiences to his introspective visual language, centered on identity and the spiritual self. In 2024, he followed with *Rooted Echoes*, a series of paintings exploring ancestral connection and timeless resonance. His visual practice also extends into digital art and NFTs, expanding his reach into contemporary and decentralized art spaces.

Professionally, Adeola has played a pivotal creative role in acclaimed advertising campaigns. As Art Director at X3M Ideas Nigeria, he contributed to major projects including the Grand Prix-winning "Soot Life Expectancy" campaign at the 2023 LUUM Awards, and "Fast Relief" for Algafen, which offered a satirical visual commentary on the everyday tensions of Nigerian enterprise.

A graduate of Olabisi Onabanjo University, Adeola also holds an MSc in Design Innovation from De Montfort University, Leicester. His work reflects a balance of cultural introspection and sharp creative direction—whether through public exhibitions or award-winning commercial campaigns. His visual language is grounded in storytelling that resonates across borders, mediums, and generations.



Rooted Man
2025



Rooted Love
2025



Perspired Aspiration
2024



Perspired Aspiration II
2024

OLU
FRANK IDOZIE



Olu Frank Idoze, Creative Art Director of OFI Expressions and Culture Enterprise, is a selftaught visual arts designer passionate about preserving African heritage through storytelling. Inspired by traditional motifs and local artistry, his journey began with experimenting in straw and fabric, which grew into a career rooted in cultural expression.

Specializing in straw inlay, mixed-media, and cultural illustration, Idoze fuses traditional African artistry with contemporary design. His works—marked by earthy textures, symbolic motifs, and historic patterns—explore themes of unity, resilience, identity, and everyday African life.

Through commissioned works, exhibitions, and mentorship from indigenous artisans, he has refined a style that is both visually striking and culturally profound, establishing himself as a distinctive voice in contemporary African visual arts.



Behind the Scene
2025



Still, She Rises
2025



Stride
2025



After Dusk
2025



Dusk
2025



ABOUT OMENKA GALLERY

Omenka Gallery is a leading art gallery in Nigeria and Africa, representing a fine selection of established and emerging contemporary Nigerian and international artists working in diverse media. With a particular focus on ensuring a sustainable presence for Nigerian and African art within a larger global context, Omenka regularly participates in major international art events like; *Art Dubai*, UAE; *The Armory Show*, New York; the *Joburg Art Fair*, *Cape Town Art Fair*, *Cologne Paper Art*, *LOOP*, Barcelona; the *London Art Fair* and *1:54 Contemporary African Art Fair*, London.

Omenka also offers to its esteemed clients a range of advisory services including appraisals, collections management, training and professional development, art finance, as well as industry reports and due diligence. Our in-depth knowledge is drawn from our diverse backgrounds built over 13 years, running and managing one of the leading galleries on the continent, consulting for other important galleries, auction houses and museums, and participating in prestigious events all over the world.

In association with Revilo, Omenka has an active publications programme and produces exquisite catalogues with informed, scholarly texts to accompany its schedule of solo, group and large themed exhibitions, through which it stimulates critical thought and discourse centred on contemporary art development in Nigeria, as well as Africa and its diaspora.



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